

## Rice's India visit likely to make way for Bush

AFP, New Delhi

Top US diplomat Condoleezza Rice is expected to pave the way for a trip by President George W. Bush to emerging economic power India when she arrives here today for a whirlwind day of meetings.

Rice, on her first visit to Asia since becoming secretary of state, will hold meetings on Wednesday with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Foreign Minister Natwar Singh and senior opposition leader Lal Krishna Advani.

Bush wants to come to India to build on a growing business relationship between the countries, discuss regional issues such as the peace thaw between India and Pakistan and the takeover by King Gyanendra in Nepal, and cajole New Delhi to support efforts on rebuilding Iraq, diplomats said.

"Bush has already said he'd like to visit India early in his second term," a New Delhi-based US diplomat said. "That's not the official reason for the trip by Rice, but it will likely come up, as well as regional cooperation and deeper business ties."

It was widely seen as a diplomatic triumph in India when Bush

accepted Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's invitation to visit when they met last September on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

"There is a broad commitment from Bush to visit India but the dates still have to be finalised. It would certainly come up for discussion during Rice's visit," said Raja Mohan, an adviser to India's National Security Council.

US companies are flocking to India to open offshore service centres, sell consumer goods to its growing middle class and push sales of high-tech and military equipment. Two-way trade between the countries rose 17 percent to 21 billion dollars last year.

Singh, who came to power as head of a coalition government in May 2004, urged US companies to invest in India in a speech at the New York Stock Exchange in September.

The prime minister sees India's foreign policy as being "driven by economic interests" with the United States and China, which have emerged as the country's leading trade partners.



PHOTO: AFP

Legislators from the pro-independence Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) burn a Chinese flag outside the parliament building to protest against the anti-secession law in Taipei yesterday. China's parliament passed a law yesterday giving its military the legal basis to attack Taiwan if it moves towards independence, a day after China's President Hu Jintao told the army to prepare for war.

## China enacts law to stop Taiwan's independence

Taipei condemns move, lawmakers torch Chinese flag

THE CHINA DAILY/ ANN, Beijing

The annual session of China's top legislature, the National People's Congress (NPC), voted to pass the Anti-Secession Law yesterday, setting a legal framework to prevent Taiwan from being seceded from China and promote peaceful national reunification.

Of the deputies sitting at yesterday's closing session at the Great Hall of the People, 2,896 deputies voted for the law, with no objections and only two abstentions.

Chinese President Hu Jintao has signed his name on the bill on March 14, 2005, and the law comes into immediate effect.

Using non-peaceful means to stop secession would be the last resort, when all efforts for a peaceful reunification should prove futile, the law says.

The act provides that in the event that the "Taiwan independence" forces should act under any name or

by any means to cause the fact of Taiwan's secession from China, or that major incidents entailing Taiwan's secession from China should occur, or that possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted, the state shall employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, says the law.

Prior to the deliberation of the draft law, Chinese President Hu Jintao, also chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the Communist Party of China, set forth his four-point guidelines for cross-Straits relations on March 4, stating that the Chinese people will do their best to seek peaceful reunification of the motherland but will never tolerate "Taiwan independence".

"We will continue to make our greatest efforts to make our utmost sincerity to seek the prospects of peaceful reunification. Meanwhile, we will never tolerate 'Taiwan inde-

pendence' and never allow the 'Taiwan independence' secessionist forces to make Taiwan secede from the motherland under any name or by any means," said Hu.

Evidence has shown that the "Taiwan independence" secessionist forces and their activities are increasingly becoming the "biggest obstacle for the development of cross-Straits relations" and the "biggest real threat to peace and stability in the region around the Taiwan Straits", the president said.

Hu urged the "Taiwan independence" secessionist forces to abandon their secessionist stand and stop all "Taiwan independence" activities, saying that "we hope the leader of the Taiwan authorities could earnestly fulfill the 'five no's' commitment he reaffirmed on Feb. 24, as well as his commitment of not seeking 'legalization of Taiwan independence' through the 'Constitutional reform'."

"(We hope that he could) show to

the world, through (his) own concrete action, that this was not an empty word or mere lip service which can be forsaken at will," Hu added.

AFP adds: Taiwan condemned China's anti-secession law passed yesterday as an authorisation for war against the island, while furious lawmakers torched a Chinese flag and vowed to rally one million people to protest.

"The law is tantamount to authorization of war... as the law's essence is allowing adoption of 'non-peaceful' means against the island if necessary," cabinet spokesman Cho Jung-tai told reporters.

"All people in Taiwan are against the legislation, and we believe the world community also opposes it," Cho said shortly after the legislation was passed by an overwhelming majority in Beijing.

## 'Melting glaciers threaten water crisis'

AFP, Geneva

Global warming is causing Himalayan glaciers to rapidly retreat, threatening to cause water shortages for hundreds of millions of people who rely on glacier-dependent rivers in China, India and Nepal, WWF warned yesterday.

The warning by the global conservation group comes as WWF released a new report, which it said exposes the rate of retreat of Himalayan glaciers accelerating as global warming increases.

The report indicates glaciers in the region -- which represent the greatest concentration of ice on the planet after the Arctic poles -- are now receding at an average rate of 10 to 15 meters (33 feet) per year.

"The rapid melting of Himalayan glaciers will first

increase the volume of water in rivers, causing widespread flooding," said Jennifer Morgan, director of the World Wide Fund for Nature's Global Climate Change Programme in a statement.

"But in a few decades this situation will change and the water level in rivers will decline, meaning massive economic and environmental problems for people in western China, Nepal and northern India."

Himalayan glaciers feed into seven of Asia's greatest rivers -- the Ganges, Indus, Brahmaputra, Salween, Mekong, Yangtze and Yellow rivers -- ensuring a year-round water supply to hundreds of millions of people in the Indian subcontinent and China. The WWF report was published in the run-up to two meetings in London on climate change organized by

Britain as current head of the G8 group of industrialised nations.

The gatherings, a ministerial roundtable of the 20 largest energy using economies in the world, and then a G8 meeting of development and environment ministers focusing on climate change, take place from March 15-18.

In a letter sent to participating ministers, WWF stressed the need to recognise climate change as an issue that seriously threatens security and development.

"Ministers should realize now that the world faces an economic and development catastrophe if the rate of global warming isn't reduced," Morgan said.

A study commissioned by WWF shows that dangerous levels of climate change could be reached in just over 20 years and that if nothing is done, the earth will have

warmed by two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels by some time between 2026 and 2060.

"All countries must understand that crossing the two degree Celsius ceiling is truly dangerous," said Morgan.

As glacier water flows dwindle, the energy potential of hydroelectric power will decrease, causing problems for industry, as well as agriculture, as reduced irrigation means lower crop yields, WWF said.

The environmental watchdog's report shows that three of Nepal's snow-fed rivers have shown declining discharge. Nepal has an annual average temperature rise of 0.06 degree Celsius per year.

## al-Qaeda ally may target US schools

REUTERS, Washington

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al-Qaeda's chief ally in Iraq, may be planning attacks on "soft targets" in the United States including movie theaters, restaurants and schools, Time magazine reported on Sunday.

White House national security adviser Stephen Hadley would not discuss the specific warning, which Time said was circulated among US security agencies last week in a restricted bulletin.

But he said the administration was concerned about reports -- "which we think are very credible" -- that Zarqawi is working more closely with Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda organisation.

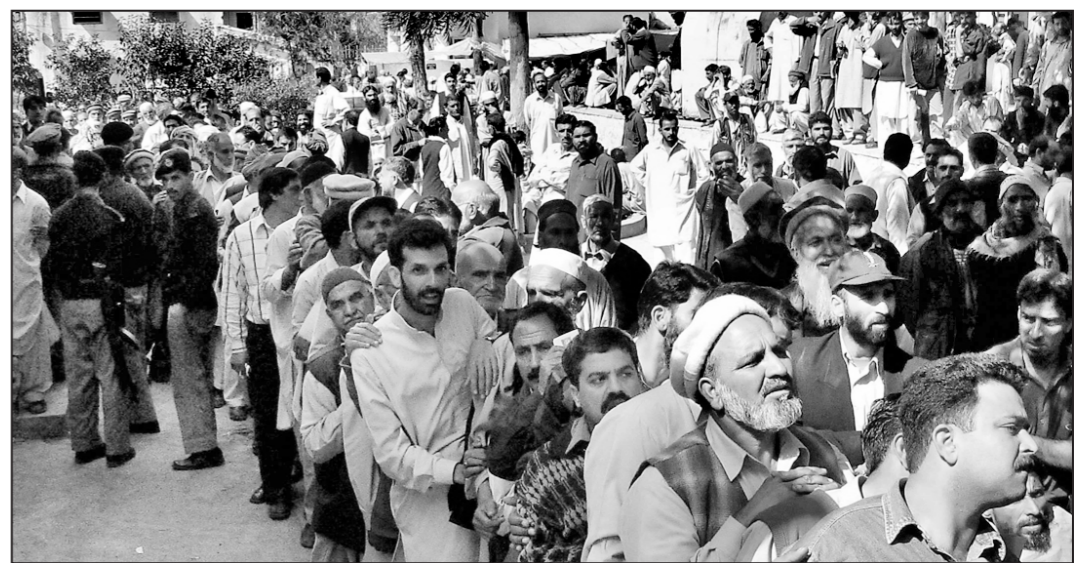


PHOTO: AFP

Residents of Pakistan controlled Kashmir queue to get forms to apply for permits to travel by bus to Indian controlled Kashmir at a local office in Muzaffarabad yesterday. Thousands of Kashmiris have gathered to collect forms as Indian and Pakistani officials are working hard to repair roads ahead of the historic launch of bus service between divided zones of Kashmir on April 7.

## US encouraged by Syria-UN talks

Thousands join anti-Damascus rally

REUTERS, Washington

The United States called on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on Sunday to follow through as soon as possible on what it called "encouraging" promises to a UN envoy to fully withdraw Syrian troops and intelligence agents from Lebanon.

After weeks of escalating tension, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice cautiously welcomed the "positive development." White House national security adviser Stephen Hadley said, "Initial reports are encouraging" and a sign that "Assad is beginning to hear the message."

"I think we have to take him at his word," Hadley said. But he added: "What we need to see is action and deeds, not just words."

The administration signaled some flexibility about the timing of a full Syrian withdrawal so long as it was expeditious.

Tens of thousands of people flocked to Beirut on Monday for an anti-Syrian protest a month after the killing of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri.

Flag-waving crowds from across

Lebanon gathered in Martyrs' Square in central Beirut, just meters away from Hariri's grave, to demand an international inquiry into his assassination.

The opposition rally came a day after huge crowds turned out in the south for an anti-US demonstration organised by Lebanon's Shia Muslim Hizbollah group, an ally of Syria.

Organizers of the Beirut protest say it will draw hundreds of thousands to the central Beirut square that has seen daily protests demanding a full Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon.

And Hadley said the Lebanese group Hizbollah, which Washington deems one of the world's most dangerous terrorist organisations, has "an opportunity" to participate in the Lebanese political process if it agrees to "a democratic future for Lebanon under the rule of law."

Though a UN Security Council resolution demands that Hizbollah be disarmed, Hadley deferred to the incoming Lebanese government to address the issue, signaling it was not an immediate priority.

## Pooch follows master to the grave

AFP, Sydney

An elderly Australian man will be buried with his loyal dog after the animal spent almost a week guarding the deceased's body and appeared too miserable to live after being removed from his master.

The RSPCA in northeastern Queensland state said that Jess, a cattle dog cross estimated to be about 12 years old, would be put to sleep and later cremated and buried with his owner.

The dog was found lying across the body of his 74-year-old owner who died in his Brisbane home.

The animal protection society was called in when the dog attempted to shield the dead man from ambulance officers who had come to take the body away.

"The dog would just growl and attack them basically," RSPCA Queensland spokesman Michael Beatty told AFP. "It was just devoted to the owner."

Man and dog had been inseparable and while the RSPCA had originally attempted to care for the pet, they found him to be aggressive and unhappy while in their custody.

## Wild elephant searching for beer tramples 3 to death

AFP, Guwahati

Three villagers were trampled to death and seven wounded by a wild Asiatic elephant searching for home-made rice beer in India's northeastern state of Assam, a wildlife official said yesterday.

"The elephant went on a rampage tearing apart huts and then attacked sleeping villagers killing three and seriously injuring seven more," said M. Rahman.

The tusker strayed from a big herd in the jungle and ransacked the village of Dalokgarupara Sunday morning in a hunt for fermented "chang" made from rice grains.

"The elephant herd came near the village looking for home-brewed rice beer. One of the animals strayed out from the herd and did the damage," Rahman said.

In the past two weeks, elephants have wreaked havoc in several parts of Assam as farmers harvest rice and use some of the grain to make a paint-peeling moonshine.

"For a stiff drink, elephants would blast through walls... they go berserk, at times plundering granaries and tearing apart huts, besides inflicting fatal attacks on human beings," elephant expert Kushal Konwar Sharma told AFP.

## Annan pledges support for Abbas

AFP, Ramallah

UN chief Kofi Annan assured Mahmud Abbas yesterday that the world would work to create a Palestinian state, one day before the Palestinian leader was to hold crunch ceasefire talks in Cairo.

Annan is paying his first visit to the region in four years, a month after Israel and the Palestinian Authority declared an end to more than four years of violence at a landmark Middle East conference in Egypt.

"The international community is determined to work with both sides to press ahead with the peace process and the implementation of the roadmap," said Annan after meeting Abbas in West Bank city of Ramallah.

"I think that the possible developments give us a chance to re-energise the process and work to

ensure that the day a Palestinian state will be established living side by side with Israel will not be too long" in the future, he added.

The UN chief's visit coincided with the announcement that Israel would evacuate 24 unauthorised rogue settlements built in the West Bank since Sharon came to power in March 2001.

Israel's decision to dismantle the outposts complies with a key requirement of the moribund roadmap peace plan, drafted by the European Union, Russia and the United Nations and United States.

Annan said he and Abbas discussed Israel's planned withdrawal from the Gaza Strip later this year and efforts to handover security control to the Palestinian Authority in five West Bank towns.

He said the security transfer -- which had stalled last week -- "is going to take place fairly shortly"

and that he was "very encouraged" after his talks with both Abbas and Sharon on Sunday.

Welcoming Annan's visit as "important", Palestinian foreign minister Nasser al-Qidwa insisted that "international law and the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions" must be the basis for a lasting peace.

But outside the Palestinian government compound, some 500 demonstrators gathered to denounce Israel's controversial West Bank security barrier, with protestors trying to bash down the metal gates, said an AFP correspondent.

"It's forbidden to implement the UN decision on Lebanon and not here in Palestine," said Mustafa Barghuti, the unofficial Palestinian opposition leader.



PHOTO: AFP

A Lebanese Christian woman waves her national flag in Beirut's downtown as they joined the massive anti-Syria demonstration yesterday. By car, bus and boat thousands of Lebanese made their way toward the capital for another huge demonstration called by an emboldened opposition determined to end Syria's near 30-year military presence in Lebanon.